

In Sweltering South, Climate Change Is Now a Workplace Hazard

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Highlight: Workers laboring outdoors in southern states are wrestling with the personal and political consequences of a worsening environment.

Body

GALVESTON, Tex. — Adolfo Guerra, a landscaper in this port city on the Gulf of Mexico, remembers panicking as his co-worker vomited and convulsed after hours of mowing lawns in stifling heat. Other workers rushed to cover him with ice, and the man recovered.

But for Mr. Guerra, 24, who spends nine hours a day six days a week doing yard work, the episode was a reminder of the dangers that exist for outdoor workers as the planet warms.

“I think about the climate every day,” Mr. Guerra said, “because every day we work, and every day it feels like it’s getting hotter.”

For many working class people, President Trump’s promise to make America great again conjured images of revived factories and resurgent industries, fueled by coal and other cheap fossil fuels. Such workers gave more of their votes to Mr. Trump than they did four years before to Mitt Romney, helping him eke out victory in November with narrow wins across the Rust Belt. Latino votes fell off for Democrats as well, from the 71 percent that went to Barack Obama in 2012 to the 66 percent that went for Hillary Clinton last year.

But to Robert D. Bullard, a professor at Texas Southern University who some call the “father of environmental justice,” the industrial revival that Mr. Trump has promised could come with some serious downsides for an already warming planet. Professor Bullard is trying to bring that message to working-class Americans like Mr. Guerra, and to environmental organizations that have, in his mind, been more focused on struggling animals than poor humans, who have been disproportionately harmed by increasing temperatures, worsening storms and rising sea levels.

“For too long, a lot of the climate change and global warming arguments have been looking at melting ice and polar bears and not at the human suffering side of it,” Professor Bullard said. “They are still pushing out the polar bear as the icon for climate change. The icon should be a kid who is suffering from the negative impacts of climate change and increased air pollution, or a family where rising water is endangering their lives.”

The “environmental justice movement” has, in fact, caught on with major environmental groups, but it has far to go before it begins moving the dial in the nation’s politics. Professor Bullard envisions the recruits for his movement coming not only from the liberal college towns of the Northeast and Midwest, but also from the sweltering working-class communities in the Sun Belt, which he sees as the front line of the nation’s environmental wars.

Residents of working-class communities in the Sun Belt often cannot afford to move or evacuate during weather disasters. They may work outside, and they may struggle to cover their air-conditioning bills. Pollution in their communities leads to health problems that are compounded by the refusal of most Sun Belt state governments to expand Medicaid access under the Affordable Care Act.

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Working-class people must juggle a long list of problems, from getting gainful employment to finding decent schools. But Professor Bullard is trying to raise awareness of the environment around them. For the poor, the challenges of climate change are not abstract. John W. Nielsen-Gammon, a professor of atmospheric sciences at Texas A&M University who is the Texas state climatologist, says that in coastal southeast Texas, seasonal temperatures are about 1.5 to 2 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than they were in the early part of the 20th century.

In Texas, as in other parts of the world, that seemingly small average warming leads to a much greater chance of extreme heat waves, scientists say.

Mr. Guerra, who said he could not afford health care and feared this summer could lead to more spells of sickness, is hoping he can get a new job once he finishes the industrial mechanic program at College of the Mainland. Until then, he plans to use the \$115 a day he makes mowing lawns to pay for school and rent. Mr. Guerra also hopes President Trump will reconsider his environmental policies.

"They don't know what's going on and can't say anything because they are in cool houses and in offices," Mr. Guerra said.

Professor Bullard and others in his field have hosted conferences on climate change and environmentalism at historically black colleges and have taken groups of black students to climate meetings to educate them on the intersection of race, income and the environment.

"I've been doing this work for 40 years and I have seen change; 25 or 30 years ago, many of the white organizations that were doing environmental work, they had no black members, no black staff and no black people on the board," he said. "They had no contact with black communities and communities of color, and that has changed a bit."

Freelander Little, 49, of Galveston, understands the trauma of abandoning a home because of flooding. In 2008, Hurricane Ike tore through the city and destroyed almost all of her family's belongings. Her sister's home, which was next door, collapsed onto Ms. Little's, which filled with seven feet of water. For months, she and her three children lived in hotels and used vouchers to get by while their home was rebuilt, eight feet off the ground.

When people like Professor Bullard talk of a warming climate producing more frequent and stronger storms, Ms. Little shudders. Attributing Ike's power to a warming climate is scientifically dicey, but to her the warnings of climate scientists ring true.

"Climate change is my life," Ms. Little said.

Professor Bullard said that part of his mission was getting people to understand the particular danger that storms like Ike can pose for working-class people. "We are bringing in the Black Lives Matter folks and talking climate justice and the black lives that were lost in New Orleans because of climate change and because of who was left behind on roof tops," he said, referring to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "Racism left them behind on rooftops."

And race is beginning to infuse the response to Mr. Trump's environmental policies. When the president began transforming the Environmental Protection Agency, Mustafa Ali, who is African American, resigned after more than two decades there.

"Science should be talking about how do we improve lives and what is it that is going to impact a life," said Mr. Ali, a former assistant associate administrator for environmental justice at the E.P.A. who now works at the Hip Hop Caucus, a nonprofit focused on activism through hip-hop music. "So instead of thinking about trickle-down effects, we need to be thinking about building-up effects."

The unleashing of the fossil energy sector that Mr. Trump has championed could have repercussions more immediate than the global climate. In Houston, predominantly African-American neighborhoods like Sunnyside and Pleasantville have been dealing with pollution from the energy sector for years.

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Ana Parras, her husband, Juan, and her stepson, Bryan, have been educating Houston residents about the dangers of living in communities surrounded by refineries and chemical plants. And they speak from experience. Ms. Parras recently began having breathing problems herself.

“Sometimes I can actually taste chemicals on my lips and I think to myself, ‘Maybe this is the price you pay for working and doing some of this stuff,’” Ms. Parras, 51, said as tears filled her eyes. “At the same time, I have even more empathy for these communities because a lot of these children have asthma and are sick.”

The Parras family has spent much of its time in Manchester, a community in Houston that is one of the most polluted places in the country. Because of Houston’s liberal land-use laws, the community is ringed by an oil refinery, a chemical plant, a car-crushing yard, a wastewater treatment plant and an interstate. In 2010, the Environmental Protection Agency found toxic levels of seven carcinogenic air pollutants in the neighborhood.

“You can’t have freedom and justice in this country if you can’t breathe your air, if you can’t open your window because of the toxic smells,” Senator Cory Booker, Democrat of New Jersey, said. “It may not be a billy club that is hitting you or a dog that is tearing your skin — those images from the Civil Rights movement — but it is violence to the body.”

Eva Morales, 44, who has lived in Manchester for more than three decades, said she would like to sell her house but has not attracted offers high enough to allow her to buy a new one elsewhere. While climate change may not be at the top her mind, the chemical smell in the air is, she said.

“We are kind of trapped. We don’t have money to just pick up and leave. We don’t have options,” Ms. Morales said. “Who knows how it is going to affect me later? I don’t know. How will it affect my kids? I don’t know.”

PHOTOS: Adolfo Guerra, a landscaper in Galveston, Tex., said he works nine hours a day. “Every day it feels like it’s getting hotter,” he said.; Mr. Guerra at work. Activists are honing climate change arguments to highlight the negative effects on ordinary people. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALYSSA SCHUKAR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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